A challenge to all
lovers of Mary

"Make her known"
POPE PIUS IX

OUR MOTHER
of
PERPETUAL HELP

- The Picture That Is Everywhere
- Where the Picture Came From
- The Meaning of the Picture

by

JAMES J. GALVIN, C.SS.R.

1

The Picture that is Everywhere

WHEN the Holy Father, Pius XII, paid homage to the first mother in all history privileged to attend the canonization of her own flesh and blood, her daughter, Maria Goretti, he presented her with a picture of the Mother of God, a copy of the miraculous picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help.

President Truman on his pre-election campaign of 1948 stopped at Boys Town in Nebraska. In token of the president's visit, the mayor of that year, a young Negro, presented Harry Truman with a large plaque of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. In the November 16, 1948, issue of *Life* magazine, there is a photograph of the President of the United States holding in his hands a large copy of what has been called "the world's most popular picture of Our Lady."

Unexpected Places

You might consider that statement an overzealous exaggeration; and yet there is more than a grain of truth in it. Every American client of Our Lady of Perpetual Help knows that this picture of the Mother of God turns up in the most unexpected places. In the golden mitre of the present archbishop of Baltimore, Francis P. Keough, there is embroidered a beautiful replica of this Madonna. And by way of contrast there is a picture of Perpetual Help in the Catholic chapel of Atlanta's federal penitentiary. You find the same picture in Har-

lem tenements, and the ultra-ultra show windows of Gorhams on Fifth Avenue, New York. A middle aged banker in San Francisco carried a small copy of the picture in his wallet. Newsboys in St. Louis have the picture in their Home, recently publicized in the motion picture: *Fighting Father Dunn.* For over seventy-five years seven votive lamps have been constantly burning before an image of this Madonna at the Jesuit church of the Holy Family in Chicago. Over a hundred churches in the United States bear the title of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. She is no stranger exactly in the United States!

World's Most Popular Picture

But when the statement is made that this is "the world's most popular picture," it is meant literally. There are countries (there are sections of the United States, too!), where other images of Our Lady are better known, and more highly venerated by the Faithful, but taking the world as a whole: its great cities and clusters of mountain cottages, you will find everywhere this strangely sad Madonna against her golden background.

In Lands "Down Under"

Take the city of Kandy in distant Ceylon where for the past five years crowds have been making a perpetual novena in her honor. Or India . . . to quote Father Daniel Buckley in his recently published book, ". . . it is no exaggeration to say that most towns in India from Simla to Colombo, from Bombay to Cal-

cutta, possess copies of the picture of Perpetual Help." In New Zealand and Australia "there are few churches that are not provided with her picture, and comparatively few Catholic homes that are not blessed with the presence of Our Lady of Perpetual Help."

Oceania

In the Philippine Islands where Our Blessed Lady is reported to have recently appeared to a Carmelite Novice, as the Mediatress of all Graces, the Madonna of Perpetual Help has been lavish in her favors. Years ago when plague swept the island of Bohol, the people of Garcia Hernandez fell on their knees before the picture of Perpetual Help. They made a vow, that if they were spared from the plague, they would make a pilgrimage to the church in her honor, *every week* "forever." The plague swept on reaping lives by the hundreds on either side of them. Garcia Hernandez was untouched by the plague. To this day the people are faithful to their vow.

During the recent war one of the essential air-raid precautions was a picture of this Madonna. No shelter in which the picture of Perpetual Help was exposed was touched by a single bomb. So great is the faith of the Filipino in the protection of Perpetual Help, that after the Japanese invasion of the islands, their most ancient and treasured statue: that of the

Holy Infant of Cebu was brought to the shrine of Perpetual Help for safekeeping. "The Mother will look after her Little Boy," they said. And she did.

The Far East

In the diocese of Nagasaki in Southern Japan, there is a spot where the Buddhists make many pilgrimages: a shrine of Kuannon, the goddess of mercy. Because of this, a Belgian missionary, Father Emile Raguet, M.E., built close by a chapel in honor of the true Mercy Seat, Our Lady of Perpetual Help. You will find her picture in the cathedral of Osaka also in the very heart of Japan.

And in China, where at present Communism is making such fearful inroads, this oriental Madonna had great and wide appeal. On a hill overlooking the port of Shanghai there is a church of Perpetual Help, that has been for many years a great place of pilgrimage. It is built on the ruins of a Buddhist temple, almost a prophetic symbol that the true Mother of God will yet make China completely her own.

It is nothing unusual in Saigon, the capital of Cochin China, to find a note like the following beneath the picture of Perpetual Help: "I . . . though a pagan, come to beg of the all powerful Mother of Perpetual Help the following favor . . . ; and if I receive it I and all my family will embrace the Christian Faith." At this church devotions are conducted in Tamil, in French, and in Annamite on three separate days each week.

Soviet Russia

And what about Soviet Russia? Those who have read the book: *God's Underground* know that Our Lady and her divine Son are still held in honor in that so-called "godless" land. For five hundred years icons of Our Lady closely resembling the picture of Perpetual Help were held in highest veneration . . . in *Holy* Russia. Today in a thousand secret places they are still venerated . . . awaiting the day when the promise of Mary of Fatima will come true that "Russia will be converted." Perpetual Help is in Russia, too.

The Iron Curtain

Behind the Iron Curtain in countries now under Soviet domination the picture of Perpetual Help was venerated in the past . . . and doubtless it still is today. In Poland where the black Virgin of Czestochowa is the great Queen and Patroness, the picture of Perpetual Help is found in almost all of its churches. Archbishop Boleslaus Tardowski of Lwow used the picture as the crest of his official stationery. Before the Communists there were over twenty churches under this title in Poland. In Czechoslovakia her name is a Catholic byword. At the foot of the famous *Hradscin* in Prague there is a shrine of this miraculous Madonna rich with the votive offerings of her

grateful clients. In Budapest when Hungary's heroic Josef Cardinal Mindszenty was but a young priest, in the year 1918, the country was a prey to revolution. The Communists incited the people of Budapest to raid the Catholic churches of the capital. One convent of nuns, the Sisters of Mary Reparatrix put their confidence in Perpetual Help, praying to her through the months while church after church was sacked. The convent was preserved from harm.

From Killarney to Cologne

Catholic France boasts over twelve thousand churches with a shrine of the Mother of Perpetual Help. In Germany she is found everywhere from great cathedrals like Mainz and Cologne to little country chapels in the upper Rhineland. Wayside shrines in the Austrian Tyrol; gable-shrines in pretty Dutch houses; street-shrines in Italy are dedicated to Our Lady under this favorite title. In Spain, Perpetual Help is Patroness of the Medical Corps. More than twelve hundred churches bear her name in Andalusia. Valencia is called "the city of flowers and of Perpetual Help." In bonny Scotland the first religious monastery built since the Reformation was dedicated to Perpetual Help, and in its church every day prayers are recited for the "conversion of Scotland." She is Patroness of the dioceses of Leeds and Middleborough in England. And Ireland also knows her well from Land's End to Londonderry, from cabins in Meath to the cathedral in beautiful Killarney.

Under the Maple Leaf

All over Canada you will find copies of the miraculous picture. I found it in every church on the Ile d'Orleans, and late in June over the great portal of Beaupre. Montreal, Quebec, Ottawa, Toronto and far west in Vancouver and Saskatchewan, and as far north as Baffin Bay and even in the Arctic Circle there are shrines and clients of this loving Madonna. Bishop Cody of Victoria suggested that the perpetual novena be established in every parish of his diocese. The same novena is attended by large throngs in over 300 churches as well as the cathedrals of Pembroke, Regina, Vancouver and Antigonish.

Latin America

In Latin America from Puerto Rico and Mexico straight down to the tip of Patagonia there are hundreds of shrines of Perpetual Help. In Santiago de Chile she is honored with a special basilica. Peruvian Indians have sent hand wrought souvenirs for her shrine in Rome. The lepers in Surinam kneel before her picture. Her feast in Buenos Aires is a day of traditional fiesta. Her favors have been many in the Brazilian jungles of Mato Grosso and Amazonas. In Bella Vista, Paraguay, she is honored with a large wayside shrine, the property and treasure of the municipality. Up in

Haiti in the Caribbean her image has appeared even on postage stamps. And in Jamaica the Jesuit Fathers have a shrine of Perpetual Help that is a place of pilgrimage for the whole island. In the Virgin Islands you will find her in taxicabs and airplanes, in barber shops and theaters, as well as the homes of the Islanders.

The Near East

In Africa: in Tunis, the Transvaal, or the reaches of the Belgian Congo you will find her, and in Egypt, too, among the Copts. Visitors to the Holy Land have noted that at the place of the fourth station along the Via Dolorosa there is a mosaic of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. She is called "the most popular picture of Our Lady in the Near East." And rightly so, for the Near East is traditionally her native land; the isle of Crete, where some anonymous master painted her, a bold variation on the famous *Hodeguitria* the picture of the Mother of God from the brush of the Evangelist St. Luke.

II

Where the Picture Came From

THE ORIGINAL PICTURE of Our Lady of Perpetual Help claims no miraculous origin. It did not appear spontaneously as did the picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe, depicted by no human hand, on the rough cloak of the Mexican Juan Diego. Nor was it painted according to Our Lady's own specifications, like the image on the Miraculous Medal, dictated by Our Lady to St. Catherine Laboure. It records no historic apparition of the Mother of God as does the statue of Our Lady of Lourdes; it recalls no insistent message of Mary as does the Pilgrim Virgin of Fatima.

Lost in Legend

No well-known master painted the picture of Perpetual Help. Certainly St. Luke the artist-evangelist did not execute it, though in some details, and in style, it resembles his famous *Hodeguitria* destroyed by the Turks at the fall of Constantinople in 1453. The simple fact of the matter is that its origin is lost in Legend. Exactly where it was painted; who its author was . . . no one can declare with any certainty today. Its origin is *unknown*. But that many favors have been wrought through it . . . is historical fact. Even when it first cleared the mist of Legend in the late fifteenth century it was already "miraculis clara" . . . famous for miracles.

The Vatican Archives

The earliest historical document concerning this "ancient and miraculous picture" of the Mother of God was discovered in the secret archives of the Vatican at the beginning of this century. The document is a copy of another that hung in the Roman church of St. Matthew for almost three centuries, explaining how the picture of Mary of Perpetual Help came to be enshrined in that church in the year 1499. This parchment document contains almost all that is known of the earlier history of this world-famous picture.

The Document

Herewith we give a translation of this document from the Vatican Archives, written in Latin and Italian four hundred and fifty years ago:

"A certain merchant, a native of Crete, stole this picture of the Virgin, which had worked many miracles in one of the churches of that same island. Concealing the picture among his goods, he boarded ship, and set out to sea. Thereafter so great a storm broke upon them that the sailors were beginning to despair of safety, and, knowing nothing of the picture, they offered many heartfelt prayers to God and to the Virgin, to save them from the danger that threatened to engulf them momentarily. It being the will of God they reached the port which they sought.

A Last Favor

"At the end of a year the merchant came to Rome, bringing the picture with him. Just then, having contracted a serious illness, he sent for a certain Roman acquaintance of his, and besought him to care for him in his illness, promising to repay him well when God restored his health. The Roman brought the ailing merchant to his home, and there watched over him tenderly. But the malady grew worse, and the merchant, seeing his last day was at hand, summoned his friend to his bedside. Bursting into tears the dying man begged him for one last favor.

Word of Honor

"The Roman promised he would do anything the man requested. Then the merchant confessed everything concerning the picture: how he had taken it by theft from a certain church where it had wrought many miracles; that it would be found among his belongings. 'Therefore,' he concluded, 'since my approaching death deprives me of taking this picture whither I would, do you take it, I beseech you, and place it in some church wherever you deem worthy.'

"After the merchant's death the picture was found among his goods; but the Roman's wife prevailed upon him with many entreaties to keep it in the house; and having placed it in her bedroom, she kept it there for nine months. The glorious Virgin admonished the Roman in a vision not to retain the picture, to

put it some more honorable place. He paid no heed. After some time had elapsed, the Virgin again returned, admonishing him not to keep the picture in his house. Disregarding this second vision, the Virgin admonished him once more, adding that, if he did not restore it to some church, he would die an untimely death.

Fears Allayed

"Whereupon the Roman began to fear, and in the morning recounted everything to his wife, beseeching her to donate the picture to some church. She expressed astonishment that he should say such things: that she was not a pagan but a Christian, and that they were not the only ones who kept such a picture in their homes; nay, that there never was a Christian so utterly degraded as not to have in his home some picture of the Virgin or Christ crucified or a similar image.

"Accordingly the Roman yielded to his wife. Again the Virgin returned telling the Roman in a vision: 'Behold, many times I have admonished you, and urged you even with threats, to take me forth from your home, and you did not want to believe. It is necessary now that you first be taken forth, so that, afterwards, I may find a more honorable place.' Shortly the Roman took sick, and passed away.

The Picture Gets Its Name

"Then the Virgin came in a vision to the Roman's daughter and said: 'Go to your mother and grandfather and say to them: "*Holy Mary*

of Perpetual Help warns you to take her from your house; otherwise all of you will die soon." ' The girl related the vision to her mother. Then the mother began to fear, because she, too, had had a similar vision, and realizing that she had been the cause of her husband's death she began to weep, and straightway decided once and for all to remove the picture from her house.

A Neighbor's Words

"A neighbor noticing her weeping, implored her to tell why she was so sad. She recounted everything to her; concerning her husband's vision, and how, disbelieving, because of her protests and objections, he had died; that she grieved because she was the cause of her husband's death. The neighbor made answer: 'You deceive yourself; in fact, it is absurd to believe these things. The Virgin Mary is in Heaven and is not concerned with what is done to her painted pictures here below. If you were to put it in the fire the flames would consume it just like any other piece of wood! But if you are so timid,' she concluded, 'give it to me.' And she added many other words of abuse.

"That evening when the neighbor went home with the picture, she was stricken with a strange disease. By praying, and making a promise before the picture, she was cured.

Our Lady's Wish

"Finally the glorious Virgin appeared again to the aforementioned girl, saying that she should tell her mother to place her picture *between the basilica of St. Mary Major and that of St. John Lateran,* in a certain church dedicated to the holy Apostle Matthew. The mother obeyed and sent for the Brothers of St. Augustine who were then in charge of the church; and the clergy and all the people being present, it was carried to that church, where on that same day that it was transferred, this first sign was seen: a certain man, whose arm was so contracted that he could not move it at all, humbly recommended himself to God and the Virgin, and having made a promise, was cured on the instant.

"In this way this picture of the most glorious Virgin was placed in the aforesaid church of Blessed Matthew the Apostle on the twenty-seventh day of March, 1499, during the Pontificate of our Most Holy Father and Lord in Christ, of Our Lord Pope Alexander VI, in the seventh year of his Pontificate."

For 300 Years

So much for the most ancient document concerning the miraculous picture of Perpetual Help. It stresses three points especially: First, that the picture had been long venerated in Crete and famous for miracles; second, that Our Lady herself gave it the new name of "*Perpetual Help*"; and third, that she chose the spot where she wished it to be venerated in

Rome . . . "in the church between the Basilica of St. Mary Major and that of St. John Lateran." From the year 1499 until the third of June in 1798 it hung over the main altar in the Church of the Apostle St. Matthew. Guide books to Rome of this period point out that the picture there was "renowned for miracles." But as for a history of those three centuries in relation to the picture there are hardly any written documents available at present. In the years to come more may be found.

Oblivion

But in 1798 the Church of St. Matthew was leveled to the ground with about thirty other churches of Rome, by order of Massena, successor to Marshal Berthier. Rome had fallen to the armies of Napoleon. For the next sixty-eight years the famous picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help was for all practical purposes lost and forgotten. During that period it lodged in the private oratory of an Augustinian monastery. And at this point in the story an altar boy enters to show the wondrous ways of divine Providence. His name was Michael Marchi, and he often served Mass in this very oratory. This lad was destined to remember the famous picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, and be instrumental in restoring it to the veneration of the world.

In 1862

And now the dramatic story of the picture's rediscovery commences. It is the year 1862.

At recreation one day in the Redemptorist house in Rome one of the Fathers made mention of the fact that he had been reading in an old book that their church of Sant Alfonso was built almost on the ruins of the Church of St. Matthew the Apostle, where a once famous picture of Our Lady was enshrined. It was called Mary of Perpetual Help, he added. The mention of its title rang in the ears of one of the young Redemptorists present like a gong. His name, Father Michael Marchi. He told them he knew the ancient picture well! As a boy he had served Mass dozens of times in the oratory of the Irish Augustinians at Santa Maria in Posterula. He saw it there. An old lay brother had told him its history. It was miraculous!

A Jesuit Orator

However, it was not till the following February that the Redemptorists learned that it had been Our Lady's express wish that her miraculous picture be enshrined "between the Basilicas of St. Mary Major and St. John Lateran." Father Francis Blosi, S.J., mentioned the fact from the pulpit of the Gesu in Rome, where he was giving a course of sermons on Our Lady's many images. On February 7, 1863, he chose the "lost Madonna of Perpetual Help" as his theme. And almost prophetically, he concluded: "Who knows but the discovery of this vanished picture may be reserved to our day, bringing with it the blessings of world-wide peace."

Word of the Jesuit's words got back to the

Redemptorist community, at their house and church between St. Mary Major and St. John Lateran. Their Superior General was informed but for three more years he deliberated, considering all the facts with caution, until it seemed clear to him that in the designs of Providence this sacred picture of Our Lady was to be given to the Church of St. Alphonsus . . . the only church between the two basilicas mentioned by Our Lady.

In Care of the Redemptorists

Finally on December 11, 1865, the whole matter was laid before the Holy Father, Pope Pius IX. And on January 19, 1866, the miraculous picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help was brought once more to the site of its former glory. Three months later on April 26th the picture was solemnly enshrined in the Church of Sant Alfonso. It was the beginning of a new era of devotion, a new series of those wonders for which this picture had been famous for centuries. And that has been its history down to the present day.

Coronation

The following year the picture was solemnly crowned, an honor accorded only to such pictures as fulfill the three conditions: a picture

approved by the Church for public veneration; renowned for miraculous interventions; and venerated for many years. June 23, 1867, two crowns of gold studded with jewels were placed on the heads of Mary and her Divine Child; and as the Church of San Alfonso awoke to the chant of the *Te Deum*, the golden picture of Mary of Perpetual Help was enthroned above the main altar where it remains to this present day.

III

The Meaning of the Picture

A Riddle in Greek

THE original picture of Perpetual Help is an icon, done in the Byzantine manner on a tablet of hardwood. Because of its oriental origin, the dark oriental features of Our Lady, its oriental conception of the shining mystery of the Divine Maternity, its appeal is great in China. and India, in Russia and the Levant. But the strangest fact about the picture of Perpetual Help is that it should appeal at all to the Western mind. Accustomed as Europeans and the people of the Americas are to the madonnas of Rafael and Tintoretto, it is all but a surprise that they should find the stiff gold lines, the stylized pose and oriental colors to their taste. The Greek letters in bright red on either side of the picture are a puzzle to anyone who sees this picture for the first time. *What is it all about*, they inquire!

Explanation

Very simply the red characters are abbreviations for the Greek words: "Mother of God," and "Jesus"; and over the heads of the two archangels on either side of Our Lady are the words: "Michael" on the left, and "Gabriel" on the right. They explain, according to Byzantine usage, the four principal characters in the picture. Fortunately one of the master artists, Andreas Rico de Candia, who made many copies of this original in the thirteenth century, printed a Greek quatrain on some of his icons: a description of the scene portrayed in the picture of Perpetual Help.

Nightmare at Nazareth

It is evening, and the Christ-Child is asleep in the crook of His mother's arm. Suddenly in His dreams He sees St. Michael and St. Gabriel coming toward Him with the instruments of His future passion and death: a sharp lance, a sponge dripping bitter gall, the dreadful nails and the cross. Frightened He huddles close to His mother, snapping the latchet of His little sandal, so that (in the picture) it dangles from His toe. Like any frightened little boy, He murmurs His mother's name; and Our Lady like any other mother is quick to pat away His fears. But the sad look on Mary's face is indication that she, too, is thinking of the price her little Son must one day pay for our Redemption. She holds Him like a sword to her heart!

Whether this scene be based on unrecorded fact or an artist's sacred fancy . . . who can

say! It well might be "a lost verse from the tender Second Chapter of St. Luke" . . . one of the things Our Lady hoarded in her heart.

Mine of Mariology

But apart from its true or fanciful basis, the picture of Perpetual Help is a goldmine of sound Marian theology. It is definitely a Mother of Sorrows, a *Strastnaia* as this type of icon is called in Russia. Call it a *Cradle-pieta*: Our Lady grieving not with the dead, but with the living Christ in her arms.

Some of Mary's most sublime prerogatives shine from this miraculous picture. Not only her unspeakable privilege to be Mother of God, the root of all her other glories; but likewise her divine destiny to have an active share in the redeeming work of Christ, and in consequence of that, her exalted office of Dispenser of every Grace that comes from God to man.

Thine Eyes of Mercy

The refined sadness of her eyes tells of her compassion in all things with Christ. But observing the picture more closely you note that though her head inclines toward Christ, her eyes are looking out at us. Her compassion extends to all the aching members of the Mystical Body, whose Head is Christ her first-born Son. It calls to mind our plea in the *Salve Regina*: "*Turn then,* most gracious Advocate, *thine eyes of mercy toward us,*" acclaiming her prerogative of Mediatress of all Graces.

In fact the very name Our Lady gave to this

picture: Perpetual Help is synonymous with Mediatress of Graces. For when we call on Mary, begging her to be our Perpetual Help, we thereby imply that we expect her, by her *omnipotent* intercession to obtain some special Grace from God, and bestow it on us with her own tender hands.

A Pope's Command

Perhaps this was why Pope Pius IX commissioned the Redemptorists as the new custodians of this "ancient and miraculous picture" to *make Perpetual Help known everywhere;* and why God in His inscrutable Providence has seen to its phenomenal spread through almost every race and class and country in the world: to inspire the faithful everywhere to put into practice this doctrine of Our Lady's universal mediation, that by their perpetual recourse to her, they may obtain at all times and in every want, the solace of her Perpetual Help.

East and West

We mentioned the surprising fact that this picture so essentially oriental in both style and expression should have an appeal to Chrisitians of the West. Our Western minds tend to conceive Our Lady as clothed in garments of blue and white; yet in the picture of Perpetual Help we find her robed in a tunic of scarlet, with a veil of dark blue lined with green. Though we have St. Jerome's word that these very colors were worn by virgins in Palestine . . . still they clash with our Western concept of Mary. And

yet the Western world has taken this Madonna to its heart.

The Eastern world, though mainly torn by schism from the one fold of Christ, still cherishes this very picture of Perpetual Help even today. Copies are still widespread over Russia. The schismatic Greeks, the Copts in North Africa, the Ukrainian Orthodox venerate this same picture in their churches. And this is a good sign. For through this oriental Madonna, now so beloved by the West, the great Mother of God may yet bring the healing Grace of Reunion of East with Christian West: a hope so dearly cherished by our reigning Pius XII.

The picture of Perpetual Help hangs in a prominent place at the Pontifical Institute of Oriental Studies at Rome, where students from West and East converge to study the problem of Reunion. May it come to pass *through Our Lady back to Christ.*

Imprimi Potest:
JOHN M. FRAWLEY, C.Ss.R.,
Provincial Superior.

Nihil Obstat:
JOHN M. FEARNS, S.T.D.,
Censor Librorum.

Imprimatur:
✠ FRANCIS CARDINAL SPELLMAN,
Archbishop of New York.

July 5, 1950.

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PERPETUAL HELP PRESS
389 EAST 150TH STREET
NEW YORK 55, N. Y.